DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 105 472 CS 201 998

AUTHOR Ahearn, Marie
TITLE Breakdown: Mind Terror in Sylvia Plath and Doris Lessing.
PUB DATE 30 Nov 74
NOTE 29p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (64th, New Orleans, Louisiana, Nov. 28-30, 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.95 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Characterization (Literature); Gothic Novels; Higher Education; Literary Analysis; *Literary Criticism; Literary Perspective; *Psychological Characteristics; *Twentieth Century Literature; *Womens Studies
IDENTIFIERS Lessing (Doris); *Madness; Plath (Sylvia)

ABSTRACT

Both Sylvia Plath and Doris Lessing use themes prevalent in Gothic horror tales--fear, madness, dissolution of personality, the dream journey, and the grotesque--but both writers make use of these themes in their own inimitable way. This paper discusses Plath's "The Bell Jar" and Lessing's "Briefing for a Descent into Hell" in terms of these themes and relates them to themes in Edgar Allan Poe and to H. O. Lovecraft's work. (TS)

ED105472

CE

HReann D15

1974 Convention National Council Teachers of English

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Symposium Session D-15.
Popular Literature: Detective
Fiction, Science Fiction and Horror.
Saturday, November 30, 10:30 - 12:00

Breakdown: Mind Terror in Sylvia Plath and Doris Lessing

Marie Ahearn, Associate Professor of English
Southeastern Massachusetts University
North Dartmouth, Massachusetts

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Marie Ahearn
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER

CS 201 998

H.P. Lovecraft in the first lines of his Supernatural Horror in Literature said that "the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown."[1] H.P. Lovecraft was a devotee of Edgar Allan Poe, and early in the 20th century he was himself to become past master of the weird tale and progenitor of future science fiction. In our day, though, two outstanding women writers - Sylvia Plath and Doris Lessing - have chosen to confront the unknown and the fear of the unknown and to report on their confrontation in poetry as well as prose. This confrontation with fear in Sylvia Plath and Doris Lessing has generated writing marked by an intensity of emotion, of intellect and of honesty. Their writing has had a powerful effect upon their readers.

Both Sylvia Plath and Doris Lessing have acquired a wide audience in our day and, it seems to me, both have achieved the status of popular writer. The two women writers are especially popular among college student readers. While it is true that the current women's movement has contributed to the interest in these two women writers, it is also true that the intensity and stark honesty of Sylvia Plath's poetry and the impelling narrative of the anguish and hopelessness of a young girl caught in a mental breakdown in The Bell Jar has generated a widespread popular

[1]H.P. Lovecraft, Supernatural Horror in Literature (New York, 1973), p. 12.

fascination with her work. Sylvia Plath has become something of a cult figure and this situation has been promoted by the numerous women's fashion magazines that have introduced her writings to their extremely large and varied audience. Most college age young people of today, for example, and especially the young women, are familiar with some of the details of Sylvia Plath's tragic life and her suicide and have probably read some of her poems. While Doris Lessing is among the best novelists writing in English today, if not the best, her numerous works are not as well known as Sylvia Plath. Nevertheless the women's movement has generated interest in Doris Lessing's works above and beyond the usual literary audience of a contemporary novelist. And recently, it seems to me, with her shift of interest to a probing of mental breakdown and insanity, and her manifest interest in the works of R.D. Laing, the well-known psychologist, as well as her interest in science fiction and the wisdom of the East, there is a growing popular concern with the works of Doris Lessing among the college students. This increasing interest reflects both Doris Lessing's and the college student's fascination with psychology, the exploration of inner space, and science fiction.

Both Sylvia Plath and Doris Lessing use themes prevalent in Gothic horror tales - fear, madness, dissolution of personality, the dream journey, the grotesque - but both writers make use of these themes in their own inimitable way to relate their particular view of fear, of the unknown reaches of the mind, of madness. In

many ways the strains of Gothic horror are clearest and most traditional in the works of Sylvia Plath, the American writer, even though hers is a very mid-twentieth century and feminine vision (or perhaps the strains of Gothic horror are clearest and most traditional just because of this last). In the case of Doris Lessing, the contemporary British writer, who was born in Persia and who grew up in South Africa, her most recent work, Briefing For Descent Into Hell (1971), is concerned with allaying the fears that have traditionally been attached to the unknown, to the fear of a journey into the depths of the unconscious mind. She would probe the horrors of the psyche with new eyes, and in this exploration she has enlisted some of the elements common to popular science fiction. Similar strains of a combination of Gothic horror and elements of science fiction can also be found in Edgar Allan Poe and in H.P. Lovecraft. But let us turn first to Sylvia Plath and her more traditional relationship with the long tradition of Gothic horror.

It is easy to see Sylvia Plath and Edgar Allan Poe as brother and sister. Sylvia is the spiritual descendant of Poe in our day. Of course, it is only in the conditions of today that a sister to Edgar Allan Poe could emerge to write for all eyes to read a record of her own haunted personal vision in all its naked candor and tortured intensity.

Sylvia Plath's fear, her nameless dread, is imaged in the figure of the bell jar. The bell jar "with its stifling distortions" can descend without warning, at any moment, anywhere, upon any one of us.[2] From that moment on, one must live inside the bell jar, as Sylvia Plath put it, "sitting under the same glass bell jar, stewing in my own sour air"; or, if the bell jar is lifted, one must live with a suspended presence and the dread of a return descent.[3] Within the bell jar there is no openness to the circulating air; rather, there is only a slow suffocation. The bell jar image is double for while it can be used to protect delicate instruments, bric-a-brac or whatever from a contaminating environment, it is also commonly used to hold gases and to create a vacuum in chemical experiments. The use of a bell jar always leads to a vacuum --a void.

Imagine for a moment you are within a large glass bell jar with its glass walls, air tight, yet transparent. You can see out, but you cannot reach out; there is apparent space, but in fact the area is cruelly limited; the environment may appear to be clear, but as it is used up there is distortion, stifling, smothering, suffocation. You can look out and observe but you cannot participate or join with others. It is also quite possible that those outside of the bell jar are unaware that a glass wall - a wall nonetheless - separates you from them; or that your limited space and air is slowly, slowly smothering your existence.

[2]Sylvia Plath, The Bell Jar (New York, 1972), p. 197.
[3]Ibid, p. 197.

The image of the bell jar immediately conjures up a powerful and fearful theme in Edgar Allan Poe --that of living entombment and, preferably, the living entombment of a beautiful woman. One thinks of the classic short story, "The Premature Burial," with its exquisite detail of the mental and physical fears and agonies of living inhumation. It is asserted that "to be buried while alive is, beyond question, the most terrific of these extremes which has ever fallen to the lot of mere mortality."[4] Again, one thinks of the scene early in Poe's Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym where the young lad escaping to a life at sea is stowed away in a hidden afterhold far down belowdecks. He is cut off from human contact, although life goes on in the ship all about him. With but a limited supply of food and light, he watches the slow diminution of his vital necessities as his puzzlement and then despair grows over the failure of his planned release. Escape does not come; delirium begins; suffocation increases. With each passing hour of confinement, the young lad undergoes an increase of dreams, fright, delusions, hysteria. Later, in the same narrative of Pym, there is another scene which is somewhat similar, wherein the narrator is buried in a ravine by a landslide and once again undergoes the dread fate of living entombment. On this occasion the narrator comments:

[4]Edgar Allan Poe, Tales, Poems, Essays (London: Collins Editions, 1952), 257.

I firmly believed that no incident ever occuring in the course of human events is more adapted to inspire the supremeness of mental and bodily distress than a case like our own living inhumation. The blackness of darkness which envelops the victim, the terrific oppression of lungs, the stifling fumes from the damp earth, unite with the ghastly considerations that we are beyond the remotest confines of hope, and that such is the allotted portion of the dead, to carry into the human heart a degree of appalling awe and horror not to be tolerated - never to be conceived.[5]

Sylvia Plath's suffocation within the bell jar with its transparent walls might be considered more exquisite in its horror than Poe's living suffocation in a coffin buried deep below the earth because it is not as private or as individual an experience. One's sufferings are public, as it were. We can see the victim in the bell jar and he or she can see us and yet we do not understand what is really happening. Thus there is the illusion of normal life. Even though the glass walls are transparent and not as palpably heavy as the solidity of earth in the more natural and understandable circumstance of burial, the ensuing stifling atmosphere is equally oppressive and killing. Yet whether it is suffocation within the bell jar or living burial beneath the earth there is the same result: fear, distortion, horror, insanity, death.

Esther who narrates The Bell Jar gives the reader some background concerning the bell jar image when she tells of her experiences in her physics and chemistry classes at Smith College. This incident also provides an amusing instance of popular campus hoax humor wherein Esther tells how she "conned" the Dean into allowing

[5]Edgar Allan Poe, The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym (New York,). p. 165-166.

her to audit chemistry and thereby fulfill the college science requirement. The strategem went like this: Esther first took a required physics course and was one of the very rare students who pulled a straight A. She then went to the Dean and announced that both the Dean and Esther knew that she would get an A in the required chemistry course. If such was to be the case, why not give Esther permission to take the required chemistry course for credit, but without a grade, so that Esther's interest in chemistry would not be distracted by the banal pursuit of a course mark. The Dean of course was charmed by Esther's pure devotion to learning; permission was granted. Esther proceeded to attend faithfully every single chemistry class; however, she spent the entire class period writing poems in her note book and letting the varied colors, the smoke, and the instruments of the chemical experiments play upon her disinterested impressions. Never once was a chemical formula entered in her notebook. Yet the impulse behind this delightful narrative of a college Dean being hoodwinked by a student was not mere mischevious fun. Esther reveals the depth of her panic in the required science courses when she says:

> I may have made a straight A in physics, but I was panic-struck. Physics made me sick the whole time I learned it. What I couldn't stand was this shrinking everything into letters and numbers.[6]

Like Poe in his "Sonnet to Science," Sylvia Plath fears that the poet's world of dreams must go down before the stark truths of

[6] The Bell Jar, p. 29.

formula and inexorable scientific laws. As Sylvia put it there will only be the reduction of everything natural to "hideous, cramped scorpion-lettered formulas."[7] The instruments and techniques of the modern world can stifle us. While Poe would therefore dedicate his being and his art to supernal beauty and to transcendence, Sylvia Plath's brief life was a search for some possibility of commitment and for a way to break out of her confinement. Both Poe and Sylvia suffered fear, acute pain, and intense anguish in their dedication and their search; ultimately both were unsuccessful.

The question arises whether this nameless dread imaged in the bell jar and in living entombment, this separation, this fear of suffocation and death, whether this might not be the creation of a diseased imagination, the effect of insanity? Is it not true also that the slow creation of a vacuum within the bell jar or the coffin and the resulting lack of oxygen would produce dreams, distortions, and mad delusions? In the stories of Edgar Allan Poe we are never certain of the reliability of the narrator, or, sometimes at the last moment, the story turns out to be a hoax. But when Poe's narrator does sink into illusion and insanity he is driven to it through some catastrophic natural event or through the use of opium or drink. Perhaps one could also say of Sylvia Plath's work, The Bell Jar, that the narrator is unreliable, for

[7] Ibid, p. 29.

it is true that Esther ultimately does enter a mental institution for treatment. Yet the situation is always complex and the reader is never certain of the line between sane and insane. Esther sees very clearly; indeed, at time it seems as though the bell jar heightens perception, that her invisible separation provides an illuminating distance, that the rarefied atmosphere gives her heightened angles of vision. The bell jar may not distort, it may clarify. On the other hand, perhaps Esther's heightened perception is not accurate; it is only the distortion produced by the lack of atmosphere within the bell jar. We can never be sure which is the case.

The reader searches for the cause of Esther's breakdown because causes are not immediately apparent. Esther does not undergo the harrowing adventures of a weird tale. Nor does the Inquisition place her in its pit of horrors. Neither is she the victim of bizarre medical experiments conducted by a grotesque genius. None of these occur in exactly that way. Esther lives the life of a super-successful college girl of our times. And yet her everyday life becomes the bizarre landscape of the Gothic horror tale. In The Bell Jar it is the popular themes, the ordinary environment, our everyday life that, finally, exude the ambience of Gothic horror. And when the ordinary becomes threatening the result can only be terrifying.

The Bell Jar has all the elements of a popular story, but all the cliches and expectations of the popular story turned topsy-turvy. The story embraces every dream of the typical youthful

heroine in our popular adolescent literature - the accepted ideals of the college girl magazines - yet each dream realized, each success achieved, results in failure and ashes. The popular story turns into nightmare. The result is indeed grotesque, something like Nathaniel West's A Cool Million or The Days of The Locust, but not so blatantly satirical. Esther achieves everything a college girl desires: straight A's at Smith, the interest of her mentors whether professors or professionals, the financial support of an interested alumna, selection as college editor for a New York fashion magazine along with a new wardrobe and a summer of exciting activities in New York City. She is good looking, she has a boyfriend - Buddy Willard - a Yalie, who is now studying to be a doctor; he is clean-cut, wholesome, good-looking, in fact, the boy next door.[8] What more could a girl desire? Here is the dream of Seventeen magazine personified; the living embodiment of the college ideal of Mademoiselle magazine: Esther is super college woman. And yet everything comes apart, falls askew, cracks up. She attends a fashion banquet in New York City and gets ptomaine poisoning. On a skiing trip with Buddy Willard she breaks her leg. When Buddy is accepted to medical school, he develops tuberculosis and must go to a sanatorium. The people and landscape of New York are revealed as caricatures and grotesques. Dashing and handsome males in reality mask a deep hatred of women. Sexual experimentation does not lead

[8] See Mary Ellmann's essay, "The Bell Jar an American Girlhood" in The Art of Sylvia Plath, ed. Charles Newman (Indiana University Press, 1973), 221-226.

to freedom or fulfillment only to fumbling adolescent ireptitude and pain. After her return from New York and a summer spent in the close confinement of a typical suburb, Esther becomes increasingly anxious, is unable to sleep, consults a doctor, undergoes treatment and finally ends up in a sanitarium going through chemical and shock treatment. It is all similar to a hoax: this is how the world turns. Success and the dream turn out to be the horror; but perhaps it is all a sick joke.

When Esther goes to the doctor he asks her what she thinks is wrong. As she tells us, "That made it sound as if nothing was <u>really</u> wrong, I only <u>thought</u> it was wrong."[9] Well is anything really wrong? Is the world outside the bell jar so right, so sane? Could it be at all possible that the space within the bell jar is the only sane and safe place, an island saved from the contamination of an insane world? Might there not be things in the supposedly rational world that transfix Esther and make her shrink back into the prison of her self? There is the ambiguity of cause and effect captured in Esther's statement: "To the person in the bell jar, blank and stopped as a dead baby, the world itself is the bad dream."[10] Is the person blank and stopped by the vision of the horrors going on outside the bell jar or is it that the lack of air within the bell jar has produced such a distortion?

What are the possibilities that our real life, our ordinary life is insane?[11] Can one be transfixed by our everyday world because its possibilities are either so cruel or so meaningless? Or is it only a matter of one's angle of vision, after all. Indeed, it is not every mind that sees scientific formulas as diminishing humanity. Nor does every woman regard the popular collegiate ideal as meaningless or, if achieved, grotesque. Let us consider this question of one's angle of vision

[9] <u>The Bell Jar</u>, p. 106.

[10] <u>Ibid</u>, p. 193.

[11] Of course one thinks immediately here of R.D. Laing's <u>Politics of Experience</u> (New York: Ballantine, 1967). Laing's point of view will be discussed later in relation to Doris Lessing.

toward the world and its effect upon the individual in relation to Sylvia Plath's poem, "Daddy." This poem has received attention from psychologists as well as literary critics. A.R. Jones, the psychiatrist and literary critic, has written that the poem demonstrates "hatred for her mother, with whom she identifies herself, and love for her German father whom she rejects as tyrannous, brutal, and life-denying."[12] It is certain that in this poem the passive female role is considered in juxtaposition to brutal male authoritarianism. But what ought also to be emphasized is that the poem widens out from her personal world of pain, repression, and tension into the larger, shared world of our current day. And what is to be found here? It is the reality of the mind boggling terror of Auschwitz and Dachau, of Fascist violence, of genocide. It is the actual weird tale of humanity's sickness and violence and aberration, than which no Gothic tale or horror fantasy could even approach in terror. Imagination cannot exceed the grotesque reality. George Steiner has noted of this poem that it "culminates in an act of identification, of total communion with the tortured and massacred," and he goes on to assert that Sylvia comes "near the last horror."[13] And so it seems to most readers. Her every effort of mind and will strains to seer our understanding, to gripe our viscera, to affront our sensibilities with the dreadful facts, with the actual horror tales perpetrated in our time. And this because of her unblinking angle of vision, her clear perception of actual happenings, her refusal to put these things out of mind. The sufferings of the bell jar can lead to an identification with those others who are also entrapped and suffocating victims. There are no explanations why the suffering or the choice of victims, yet suffering occurs in all its pain and there is a bond among its victims.

[12]A.R. Jones, "On 'Daddy' " in The Art of Sylvia Plath, ed. Charles Newman, p.234.

[13]George Steiner, "Dying Is An Art," in The Art of Sylvia Plath, ed. Charles Newman, p. 216 and p. 218.

[14]"Daddy" in Ariel (New York, 1965), p. 50.

An engine, an engine
Chuffing me off like a Jew.
A Jew to Dachau, Auschwitz, Belsen.
I began to talk like a Jew
I think I may well be a Jew.[14]

Like Poe, Sylvia Plath begins with private pain and personal terror but from these there is created a poetry of extraordinary power, tension, and impact. This poem and others use the nursery rhyme cadence, the simple form, whose rhythms seem to mark out a secure world of childhood and innocence. The security and lulling power of the rhythmic form belies the fact of violence and hatred. And yet the child must go forth from the security of ignorance and innocence to live in this violent world. The full impact of this total realization would create tension, even hysteria, in the most steady and healthy mind. Somewhat the same techniques are used by Poe - "The Raven," for example - where the simple, mesmeric rhythm lulls onto a dreaded, yet slow building desire, for oblivion, the only place of surcease for the turmoil of this life.

While it may be true that the public world of today with its wars and bombs and all the rest is a world of terrible occurrences, is not the daily life of our everyday, personal worlds less cruel and more meaningful? Sylvia Plath looks upon life through a woman's perspective and so many can join in her experience. This experience is stifling. The Bell Jar swiftly outlines the life of the adolescent girl which it shows is charted according to the expectations established by our popular culture. And these expectations are strong, enduring and pervasive. The New York City women's magazines establish the themes and provide the formulas of thought for the adolescent girl and when she attains young womanhood more magazines and advertisements provide the perspective for every facet of her everyday life; they attend to her ideas as well as the arrangement of her total environment. Yet the world of the New York City fashion and woman's magazines and

[14]"Daddy" in Ariel (New York, 1965), p. 50.

the world of product advertising and clothes achieve only for this moment so that every triumph of style is quickly cast aside in search of the ever-new image. There is only the surface that catches the eye; there is no depth, no lasting meaning. The popular cultural image of women and for women is banal and meretricious. But Sylvia sees this situation to be even more serious than mere banality, for she sees it as a threatening world of terror for the woman because it is a world presenting only rigid role models for the woman. In The Bell Jar, Esther comes up against the suburban woman's ideal of home, children, family, mother. It is the world of Dodo Conway, with her architect husband, her large, rambling house and her six small children whom she raises

> on Rice Krispies, peanut-butter-and-marshmallow sandwiches, vanilla ice cream and gallons upon gallons of Hoods milk. She got a special discount from the local milkman. Everybody loved Dodo, although the swelling size of her family was the talk of the neighborhood.15

Esther can only note in honest desperation: "Children made me sick."[16] Then she crawled back into bed and pulled the sheet over her head as she says, "I had nothing to look forward to."[17]

The domestic life of women and children also encompasses the particular pain and danger of conception that is the risk of the woman. In "Three Women : A Play For Three Voices," originally written as a radio verse play for the British Broadcasting Company, the subject is birth and the setting is a maternity ward.[18] Three voices, three women in interpenetrated monologues, tell of the fears, the risk and the loneliness of giving birth; there is no one point of view to this experience

[15] The Bell Jar, p. 96.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] See Sylvia Plath, Three Women : A Play for Three Voices: in Ms. (Spring, 1972) Preview Issue, 85-88.

which is one of multi-effects: boy, girl, still or defective birth. So, too, the giver of birth can be warmly nurturing and calm, barren and death giving, or just not ready or receptive to the experience. The great event of birth is a special woman's experience which can contain terror as well as joy, which can be accepted or repulsed. But no matter what the woman's attitude birth always remains a profound risk. And since we are never sure of any risk, the fear of the unknown must be its concomitant.

Still another part of a woman's world is that of healing and doctors, of medical assistance. Yet this world also provides another dimension of the grotesque. It is not only the maternity hospital and the gynecologist, it is also the mental clinic or sanitarium and the psychiatrist. It includes all the male doctors and nurses who are obtuse and mechanical, all the intimidating medical machinery, the therapy, the pills, the chemicals, the hospital atmosphere and, finally, the electric shock treatments. The Bell Jar opens with the brief notice from the newspaper of the electrocution of the Rosenbergs as their punishment for treason. Near the close of The Bell Jar Esther receives electric shock treatments and the connection is made. The shock treatments sear and strip the nerves and though they may lift the bell jar, but what is left? The poem, "Hanging Man,"[19] as well as The Bell Jar gives testimony that helps us to approximate this supposedly healing treatment.

Sylvia Plath finds a woman's experience to be fraught with risk, to be often painful and sometimes banal. The result can generate a woman's special terror: this has been called hysteria or melancholia or, more recently, depression.[20] What

[19] "The Hanging Man" in Ariel, p. 69.

~~On the prevalence of depression among women.~~

[20] See, for example, Sunday Globe Magazine, October 6, 1974, "Depression in Women" by Myrna Weissman and Eugene Paykel, 48-51. This is an excerpt from The Depressed Woman, A Study of Social Relationships by Myrna M. Weissman and Eugene S. Paykel, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1974.

is to be done? The only way out is to go over the edge, to break out, and to hope for a healing return. Perhaps through control of the terror one can take the risk of transcendence; transcendence through death, the ultimate, which may provide a re-birth. Finally, Sylvia Plath like Edgar Allan Poe was to become her own posthumous heroine.

The poem, "Lady Lazarus," tries to explain her perilous journeys to those who do not understand, who do not see the bell jar, do not understand the terror, do not experience suffocation. The terror, the control, the risk and the hoped for change and miraculous return are sought out in order to try and slough off the imperfections of the mutilated body and mind, to lift the bell jar, to find healing, and to go through this life to an experience of the "real" - that is, beyond the limitations of mere flesh and bone, beyond violence and meaninglessness, beyond pain and depression:

> Dying
> Is an art, like everything else.
> I do it exceptionally well.
>
> I do it so it feels like hell.
> I do it so it feels real.
> I guess you could say I've a call.[21]

Escape from the bell jar, the poet seems to feel, can only occur through the extremes of violence to the point of death; this is the only way to reach the annihilation of self and thus undergo an ensuing resurrection. The problem is that this point is on the very threshold of death and the crossover is easily accomplished. The poem, "Lady Lazarus," contains the line - "Dying Is an art, like everything else." - in which the poet casually links dying, art and everything else. If this linkage were accurate then one could risk dying and, trusting in control, overcome death's menace while winning through

[21] "Lady Lazarus" in Ariel, p. 7.

to death's peaceful effect. One might be able to control the violence - of electrical charge, suicide attempt, overdose of pills - so that the dross of this life would be burned away and there would be a resurrection of a new self. From the destructive force would come the transcendence to provide a new peace. But is dying an art like everything else? Is dying the only way to achieve a new self?

> Ash, ash -
> You poke and stir.
> Flesh, bone, there is nothing there -
>
> A cake of soap,
> A wedding ring,
> A gold filling.[22]

The simple form of rhyme and meter reduces the very real fact that this is a death situation; while at the same time, the lines evoke the crematoriums of World War II. Either the violent landscape of our world or the nothing that is the materialism of our lives: here is a juxtaposition that is implosive. This is mental and emotional upset that is truly horrible. In the end, both Plath and Poe could only yearn for annihilation so that they could be separated from the pain and impediments of this life.

Doris Lessing's Briefing For A Descent Into Hell is a journey into the center of mental breakdown. Her particular interpretation of mental breakdown closely follows the writing and psychology of R.D. Laing who, in The Politics of Experience, asserts that "madness need not be all breakdown. It may also be breakthrough. It is potentially liberation and renewal as well as enslavement and existential death."[23] It may be possible through an extended journey into the self to confront the chimeras of mind and experience, to comprehend these horrors, and, ultimately, to return to our world and our life,

[22] Ibid, p. 8.

[23] R.D. Laing, The Politics of Experience (New York, Ballantine: 1967), p. 133.

but now, as a result of the journey, awakened to a heightened dimension of perception and feeling. In this way a man or woman can be his own hero and experience the monomyth.[24] The voyage into the self is undertaken through dreams and this interior descent can yield special illumination. There is no mentor or guardian who can accompany the individual all the way, for not even Virgil can assist in this visitation to the personal underworld of the unconscious.[25] It is the individual who must journey alone deep into the depths of the unconscious, confront the essential self alone, and then return to the life of our difficult world. The significance of the title - Briefing For A Descent Into Hell - is double. For hell is not alone our personal horrors and the strange things to be found in the depths of our unconscious, it is also the very real horrors of our conscious world. Those who have journeyed deep into the self, cast out the dark and moved beyond the grotesque to achieve illumination must then face the hazard of a return to earth, to the hell of our own day with its H-bombs, environmental pollution, population explosion, famine, wars and all the rest. And overarching these real horrors of our time on earth is the lack of community among all the people and the insistence upon a disastrous individualism in people and in nations. Those who have successfully journeyed to the center of self and undergone illumination, therefore, must also return with their newly gained insight; they must bring the message of illumination (prophecy, if you will) to our planet, earth, and to those who do not want to hear. Hence the return to earth constitutes a second perilous descent into hell.

[24] Joseph Campbell, The Hero With A Thousand Faces (New York, 1956).

[25] In reading R.D. Laing, Doris Lessing must have noted the comment on p. 44 of The Politics of Experience that Laing takes from The Journals of Jean Cocteau: "The creative breath comes from a zone of man where man cannot descend, even if Virgil were to lead him, for Virgil will not go down there."

It should be noted here that Doris Lessing has a keen interest in Sufism and in the teaching stories which are an important part of this Islamic tradition of mysticism. (For those who want to know more about the Sufis, she has recommended the writings of Idries Shah.[26]) Briefing For A Descent Into Hell can be considered a teaching fable for our own day, one that follows in the ancient and wise, but flexible, tradition of the Sufis.

One can only wish that Doris Lessing and R.D. Laing had known Sylvia Plath because they may have helped her to attempt transcendence in ways other than suicide. R.D. Laing chose the following quotation from Confucius as an epigraph to one of his books: "The way out is via the door. Why is it that no one will use this method?"[27] This emphasis on the door as the way out is also emphasized in Doris Lessing's Briefing.[28] So it is that the exploration of the undiscovered country need not be frightening or destroying, perhaps one can find the door out of the stifling bell jar merely by going down, down, down in a counter-clockwise spiral through sleep and into the very depths of self. In this way one can struggle with the conscious mind, grapple with these grotesque beasts

[26]Doris Lessing "What Looks Like an Egg and Is an Egg?" New York Times Book Review (May 7, 1972). In this article Doris Lessing reviews the Sufi writings of Idries Shah.

[27]R.D. Laing, Self and Others (New York:Pelican, 1969).

[28]Doris Lessing, Briefing For A Descent Into Hell (New York: Bantam, 1972) pp. 132-135. It might also be of interest to include here a selection from R.D. Laing, knots (New York: Vintage, 1972), p.85.

> Although innumerable beings have been led to Nirvana no being has been led to Nirvana
>
> Before one goes through the gate
> one may not be aware there is a gate
> One may think there is a gate to go through
> and look a long time for it
> without finding it
> One may find it and
> it may not be open
> If it opens one may be through it
> As one goes through it
> one sees that the gate one went through
> was the self that went through
> no one went through a gate
> there was no gate to go through
> no one ever found a gate
> no one ever realized there was
> never a gate.

and await illuminating transcendence. If the journey is successful, then, according to R.D. Laing's and Doris Lessing's point of view, the bell jar of Sylvia Plath could be transformed into the crystal of Illumination.

Briefing For A Descent Into Hell maintains that one ought not to be afraid of this journey into the self. Charles Watkins, the narrator and traveler of the account, makes the following observations about our expectations and fears:

> But if you have ever known in your life a high expectation which is met at last, you will know that the expectation of a thing must meet with that thing - or, at least, that is, the form in which it must be seen by you. If you have shaped in your mind an eight-legged monster with saucer eyes then if there is such a creature in that sea you will not see anything less, or more - that is what you are set to see. Armies of angels could appear out of the waves, but if you are waiting for a one-eyed giant, you could sail right through them and not feel more than a freshening of the air. So while we had not determined a shape in our thought, we had not been waiting for evil or fright. Our expectations had been for aid, for explanation, for a heightening of our selves and of our thoughts. We had been set like barometers for Fair.[29]

Charles asserts this as he commences his journey into the unconscious. With such a mental set, calm understanding is in command and paralyzing fear is exorcised: thus the journey is approached from a positive point of view. One awaits the light of illumination rather than fearing the spine-tingling darkness of terror and chaos.

In the past, both Edgar Allan Poe's dream journey short stories and many of H.P. Lovecraft's short stories were also interested in investigating the depths and intricacies of the psyche. Their emphasis was generally on the terror lurking within such an investigation or trained upon the horrific revelation to be discovered at the center. Nonetheless Poe in "Mesmeric Revelation" and H.P. Lovecraft in the following passage from "Beyond The Wall of Sleep" could also approach the depths of the psyche from a calm and positive point of view:

[29] Briefing, pp. 15-16.

From my experience I cannot doubt but that man, when lost to terrestrial consciousness, is indeed sojourning in another and uncorporeal life of far different nature from the life we know, and of which only the slightest and most indistinct memories linger after waking. From thoseblurred and fragmentary memorie we may infer much, yet prove little. We may guess that in dreams life, matter, and vitality, as the earth knows such things, are not necessarily constant; and that time and space do not exist as our waking selves comprehend them. Sometimes I believe that terraqueous globe is itself the secondary or merely virtual phenomenon.[30]

The whole course of Charles Watkins' path beyond sleep into the abyss of self is in accord with Lovecraft's assertions in the preceding passage.[31] Doris Lessing's Briefing would not deny that our imagination, our unconsciousness, can harbor strange and ugly beasts, but she would insist, it can also harbor phenomena of great beauty and insight; therefore, the emphasis is on calm and a moving away from fear. The thrill of fear is not the goal; the aim is understanding. Moreover, there is always great hope. Briefing is a text to alleviate the fear of a journey into the self, for even though it has many of the elements of the old Gothic horror tales, their terror is neutralized.

The narrator of Briefing, Charles Watkins, has been found on London Bridge wandering about in a deranged condition: he cannot remember his past; he does not know who he is; the police cannot identify him. He is put in the observation ward of a local sanatorium where Doctors X and Y prescribe various medications. Briefing is Charles Watkins' narration of his journey over the edge of conscious experience down into the deeps of the psyche, thence into the realm of transcending illumination, and the subsequent expansion out beyond self into a coalescence with a cosmos of changed time and space.

[30] H.P. Lovecraft "Beyond The Wall of Sleep" in The Lurking Fear and Other Stories (New York: Ballantine, 1971), p. 29.

[31] It should also be noted that Doris Lessing in Briefing For A Descent Into Hell did begin from Jesse Watkins story of his dream-psychotic episode as recounted in "A Ten-Day Voyage" in R.D. Laing's The Politics of Experience.

Charles Watkins' monologue of his changing adventures is broken into on various occasions, but essentially Charles is the one who gives us his story. He tells us that he is castaway with his friends in a swirling ocean but becomes separated and alone when his friends are taken into a hovering Crystal. Charles is now swept on by the inevitable momentum of the ocean and its currents until, finally, he comes to the land. He journeys inland to a deserted city. He is still alone but on this journey inland he is accompanied from time to time by strange beasts who do not bother him; indeed, they seem to guide him. Charles lives alone in the deserted city until its quiet is broken by the entrance of the rat-dogs and the apes. Charles loathes the rat-dogs, but he is not paralyzed by fear; he can co-exist in this situation. He also perceives the relationship of the rat-dogs to human beings, even though it is painful to acknowledge the similarity. Primitive women appear and involve Charles in a blood orgy; he is deeply affected by his participation in sin. Later he witnesses the wild violence of the rat-dogs and the apes who fight until annihilation. The apocalypse is at hand. Charles is participant or witness to all and he becomes aware of the levels of existence: the possibility of higher and lower levels of existence. Just when he is deepest in despair, a great white bird appears and ministers to him. (In the Jungian canon of symbols the bird could be a symbol of transcendence signifying the union of the conscious with the unconscious states of the mind. The bird has other possible interpretations also.)[32] The great white bird is friendly and helpful and flies Charles outward into the upper regions of a clean, fresh atmosphere. Later the bird returns him to the city. Charles is refreshed in spirit and sets to work to cleanse the mandala; he awaits the return of the Crystal with calm trust.

[32]See Carl Jung and Others, Man and His Symbols (New York, 1964),"Symbols of Transcendence," p. 152ff.

After the ordeal of preparation and waiting, the Crystal does descend and subsumes Charles Watkins. The Crystal itself, its description and the experience after Charles' absorption in it reminds the reader of popular science fiction stories: one thinks of C.S. Lewis' Perelandra or That Hideous Strength. Of course, one also thinks of the extra-terrestial journeys and the significance of light in Dante and Milton or The Book of Revelations in the Bible as well as science fiction. Charles describes the presence of the Crystal and its effect upon him in a long section of several pages. He tells us there was "a silence which swi'ed me into a singing calm." ... "a darkness of mind coupled with a vividness of sense."..."I was in a world of lucid glass or perhaps better, of crystalline mist."..."a delightful lightness" comes over him.[33] He goes on to tell us of the experience after absorption into the Crystal: "I was inside a tinted luminosity, my new body and this luminousness was part, like a flame in fire, of the swirl of the Crystal, and this burned whitely, an invisible dance."[34] He could feel his understanding "Move out and around"; it enlarged, "as light spreads," and he now saw things in "a new dimension, or level, of vibration."[35] But the overwhelming change was the realization that his body was now a part of the light. There now occurred an understanding of the interpenetration of matter and spirit: "Thought...I was thinking...the Crystal was a thought that pulsed and spiralled."[36] One's level of existence is in relation to the intensity of light in the understanding.[37] One is part and parcel of all humanity, all matter; all is part of mind, of thought...all is one. Transcendence has occurred.

[33] Briefing, p. 92.

[34] Ibid, p. 93.

[35] Ibid.

[36] Ibid, p. 94

[37] Ibid, pp. 94-95.

The light of the Crystal disc shines forth as the fusion of light from all the individual lights subsumed within. The individual lights pulsate from many different kinds of existences, places and persons; together these lights form a pulsing note of color and sound to make a whole. In this way the "I" and the "we" are joined: each individual is as a piece of colored glass in a shining and ever-changing mosaic.[38] The light of the Crystal and the interpenetration of spirit and matter imaged in the figure of the Crystal reminds one of the eldila of C.S. Lewis, who appear to man's senses as small pillars of light. Again, in C.S. Lewis as in Briefing, the amount of spirituality is figured as the amount of light emanating: no light, no spirit; small point of light, a small amount of spirituality in the material. Further, in Briefing as in science fiction, the earth is but a small part of galactic life, and the earth is affected by the movements and evolutionary change of the entire universe. The earth is subject to outside forces of both good and bad.

Charles Watkin's description of his assumption into the Crystal emphasizes his new won revelation: "the Crystal was a thought that pulsed and spiralled."[39] Last March, Sir James Jeans was quoted in Time magazine as saying that "the universe begins to look more and more like a great thought than a great machine."[40] And if we move back to Edgar Allan Poe's fascinating, but somewhat neglected short story, "Mesmeric Revelation," we find Poe attempting to describe the revelation received while in the mesmeric state, a state which is described as quite similar to Charles Watkins hospital sleep therapy:

[38] Ibid, pp. 94-95.

[39] Ibid, p. 94.

[40] Time, March 4, 1974.

The organs of man are adapted to his rudimental condition, and to that only; his ultimate condition, being unorganized, is of unlimited comprehension in all points but one - the nature of the volition of God - that is to say, the motion of the unparticled matter. You will have a distinct idea of the ultimate body by conceiving it to be entire brains. This it is not; but a conception of this nature will bring you near a comprehension of what it is. A luminous body imparts vibration to the luminiferous ether. The vibrations generate similar ones within the retina;...But in the ultimate, unorganize life, the external world reaches the whole body (which is of a substance having affinity to brain, as I have said), with no other intervention than that of an infinitely rarer ether than even the luminiferous; and to this ether - in union with it - the whole body vibrates, setting in motion the unparticled matter which permeates it.[41]

If all is thought then transcendence is possible and subsumption in the Crystal is breakthrough. Instead of the stagnating circle of the bell jar with its suffocating air and centripetal force, the movement has been down and out through to the shining Crystal or disc whose singing center of light is the lucent envelope that extends outward to join all in harmony and make a whole. The Crystal is transmitting light, open, luminous in its center of penetration even as its centrifugal force radiates outward. To win through to this revelation is to find a center that is not frightening; rather, it is to find at the center light, harmony, wholeness.

But after illumination how does one come down to earth? How does one spread the message of illumination, of prophecy upon the earth? There is need of further briefing. The return is still to be effected. There is a vision of Charles swimming in his harmonious whole ocean: he is Odysseus bound for home at last. Then there is an immediate shift to the mythological worlds outside the earth's ken that finally do assist Odysseus in his return home. The other worlds of gods and goddesses affects all life on earth. The gods and goddesses discuss the situation of Odysseus on the earth; Mercury is ordered to descend again, whereupon he "divides himself effortlessly into a dozen or so fragments which fall gently through the air on to Earth."[42] But here the narrative is interrupted by the comment that the previous story of the Greek and Roman deities is "all very whimsical" and that perhaps the contemporary mode is to be preferred;[43] thereupon, the episode of the other worlds of gods and goddesses is re-cast as a contemporary science fiction story.

[41]Edgar Allan Poe, Tales, Poems, Essays (London: Collins, 1952), pp. 555-556

[42]Briefing, p. 123.

[43]Ibid,

In this mini-science fiction episode in Briefing, the planetary delegates are assembled in outer space to review the forecast film of interplanetary disturbances that will affect them all but which will bear hardest upon the planet earth. The film makes note of the Solar Winds of Change and outlines the series of disasters that will afflict earth. The Permanent Staff on Earth will struggle to keep alive the idea of the human as part of a larger whole system of life and to maintain respect for the laws of Harmony. In the end, life on earth will almost die out; the few who remain will be a mutation, a new race with a different mental structure. Thus there is hope in the long run. Right now, gods and goddesses must descend into the perilous atmosphere of earth and, even though that atmosphere will weaken them, they must seek to preserve on earth some strains of truth and light. They must walk upon the earth and speak their prophetic message in whatever way possible. The Descent Team which is to join the Permanent Staff on earth is brainprinted and ready to go; Merk Ury will lead them in this historic descent; and, as the sounds and pulsations preparatory to descent increase, the narrative slips into images and fragmentary scenes of birth and babies, of sleep and awakening. After these passages Charles Watkins awakes and is told who he is:

"Professor Charles Watkins, Classics, Cambridge, married two sons, aged 50."[44]

After this, Charles undergoes further treatment and then electric shock therapy. In a rather abrupt close, Charles returns to his previous life and the reader wonders how much of the richness of his dream journey remains with him.

The science fiction episode in Briefing is one way to indicate the difficulties to be encountered by those who have a different message for the world. Prophecy is rarely well received and yet prophecy ought to be presented to a wide audience. How apt that Doris Lessing points up the difficulty of delivering a Briefing For A Descent Into Hell in a science fiction interlude. Science fiction is truly the mythology of our day. It is through the teaching stories of science fiction that we have been prepared for the future; the widespread popularity of science fiction has delivered the message to a vast audience. In this way the fantasy of yesterday has become the truth of our own day. So, too, Doris Lessing is asking us to cast aside old fears, old horrors, - the terror of mental breakdown - and to look with new vision upon our selves and our world. To face these horrors, to transcend, to be made whole and to be

[44] Ibid, p. 144.

able to return to life with a new message. The last is most difficult. The whole procedure may be so new and so different that it must be clothed in the garment of fantasy in order to be presented to a large audience. At least Doris Lessing presents us with a briefing for the journey and the future.